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Leaf and Key

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Abstract

Reviews various definitions of allegory and Tolkien’s writings on the subject to determine more precisely what type of allegory Tolkien disliked. Discusses “Leaf by Niggle,” which skirts closer to allegory than most of Tolkien’s works, but avoids becoming one.

Additional Keywords

Allegory in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Attitude toward allegory; Tolkien, J.R.R. “Leaf by Niggle”; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings

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There is a primal cry within mankind which has resounded throughout the millennia. Regardless of the topic, the event, or the circumstances, someone invariably queries, "But what does it all mean?" Literature is particularly susceptible to the question, especially in academic circles where enjoying a story for its own sake is often not enough. When the author emphatically protests any outward significance, other than simply that of a good tale, multitudinous reams of paper mount up to the heavens, frequently buttressed by Freud and/or Jung in order to explicate to the masses what lies below the conscious mind of the writer. Protestations on the part of the teller of the tale are to no avail because (as the analysts declare) he does not _really_ know what he writes anyway. A classic example has been J.R.R. Tolkien.

From the first publication of _The Hobbit_ in 1937, the readers of Tolkien's fiction wanted to know what the Middle-earth books "meant". As early as 1938, American fans were writing for "an authoritative exposition of the allegory of _The Hobbit_ (_Letters_, 41). With reference to that request, Tolkien explained to Stanley Unwin that _The Hobbit_ was not an allegory, but simply a story as would be its sequel, the _Lord of the Rings_. In the Foreword of the second edition of the trilogy, Professor Tolkien announced publically his aversion for allegory.

> "I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect it presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, the other in the purposed domination of the author." (_LR_, p.7)

With this simple statement of intent, J.R.R. Tolkien undoubtedly thought that the burgeoning numbers of Allegorists poised to "interpret" the _Lord of the Rings_ would redirect their collective attention to the writings of those who _did_ enjoy the art of Allegory. Notwithstanding the rather candid denials of any hidden political, psychological, sociological, or any other "-ical" agendas in the stories, the "yeah-but" critics insisted on interpretations, expositions, and inferences. Since they were not forthcoming from Tolkien himself, then necessity begot invention. Part of the problem involved with accepting Tolkien's insistance on there being no allegory in the Middle-earth volumes has to do with the definition of the word "allegory" itself and Tolkien's usage.

TOWARD DEFINING ALLEGORY

The _American Heritage Dictionary_ gives three operative definitions of the word "allegory":

> 1. A literary, dramatic, or pictorial representation the apparent or superficial sense of which both parallels and illustrates a deeper sense just as, for example, the story of the search for the Holy Grail may illustrate an inner spiritual search. 2. an instance of such representation. 3. Any symbolic representation.

The semantic range between (1) and (3) is enormous and because it is so vast, the word (at least in American vocabulary) has no real power of meaning. The _Oxford English Dictionary_ constrains the definition a little, but not substancially:

> 1. Description of a subject under the guise of some other subject of aptly suggestive resemblance... 2. An instance of such description; a figurative sentence, discourse or narrative, in which properties and circumstances attributed to the apparent subject really refer to the subject they are meant to suggest; an extended or continued metaphor... 3. An allegorical representation; an emblem.

Thrall and Hibbard's _A Handbook to Literature_ narrows the semantic spectrum significantly:

> A form of extended metaphor in which objects and persons in a narrative, either in prose or verse, are equated with meanings that lie outside the narrative itself. Thus it represents one thing in the quise of another -- an abstraction in that of a concrete image. The characters are usually personifications of abstract qualities, the action and setting representative of the relationships among these abstractions. Allegory attempts to evoke a dual interest, one in the events, characters, and setting presented, and the other in the ideas they are intended to convey or the significance they bear.(p. 7-8)

Thrall and Hibbard conclude with an interesting warning:

> It is important that one distinguish clearly between "allegory" and "symbolism", which attempts to suggest other levels of meaning without making a structure of ideas a formative influence on the work as it is in allegory.

This is, perhaps, as clear a statement about the difference between "allegory" and "applicability" outside of Tolkien's own writings. It is the insistant "structure" informed by the metaphor pervading every character and event that allegorizes a story. Mere symbolism, notwithstanding the dictionary, is not allegory, but a facilitator for "application".

TOWARD TOLKIEN'S DEFINITION

As was quoted above, Tolkien's objection to Allegory had to do with the author's domination over the "interpretation" of the story. The meaning is to be discovered by the reader and he can only arrive at true

enlightenment when he perceives the density and scope of the informing metaphor. Tolkien preferred to have the reader find his own meaning in the stories rather than discover all of the motivations for the writing. He was not so naive, however, as to believe or assert that he was untouched by his own life. As in all writing, Tolkien's works were influenced by his experiences and environment. As Tolkien said to Unwin of the Lord of the Rings, "The darkness of the present days [1938] has had some effect on it. Though it is not an allegory" (Letters, p. 41) If impending World War II had been symbolized in a structured metaphorical way, the trilogy would then have been allegorical. Tolkien is quite clear, however, that the depiction of the War of the Ring is not intended to resemble war of the real world (LR, 7). He explains the similarity.

> An author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience, but the ways in which a story-germ uses the soil of experience are extremely complex, and attempts to define the process are at best guesses from evidence that is inadequate and ambiguous... One has indeed personally to come under the shadow of war to feel fully its oppression; but as the years go by it seems now often forgotten that to be caught in youth by 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939 and the following years. (Ibid.)

War is war no matter the generation in which it transpires. Thus the lessons to be learned from a piece of fiction are applicable to the human condition and perhaps symbolic of it; the stories have morals but are not necessarily allegorical. In a letter dated 31 July 1947 to Sir Stanley Unwin, his publisher, Tolkien admonished Unwin not to let his son be lead astray by his reading of the unpublished manuscript of the Lord of the Rings:

> ...do not let Rayner suspect 'Allegory'. There is 'moral', I suppose, in any tale worth telling. But that is not the same thing. Even in the struggle between darkness and light (as he calls it, not me) is for me just a particular phase of history, one example of its pattern, perhaps, but not The Pattern; and the actors are individuals -- they each, of course, contain universals, or they would not live at all, but they never represent them as such. (Letters, 121)

As a student of literature, J.R.R. Tolkien recognized that there are varying degrees of allegorical writing depending on the intent, purpose, and skill of the author.

> Of course, Allegory and Story converge, meeting somewhere in Truth. So that the only perfectly consistent allegory is a real life; and the only fully intelligible story is an allegory. And one finds, even in imperfect human 'literature', that the better and more consistent an allegory is the more consistently it can be read 'just as a story'; and the better and more closely woven a story is the more easily can those so minded find allegory in it. But the two start out from opposite ends. (Ibid.)

In other words, the individual life, being the embodiment to one degree or another of all universals, is a perfect allegory; a one-to-one representation of all human abstract characteristics. A fully intelligible story is one that so perfectly describes the human condition that it is allegorical by definition. The better written a narrative is, the more likely a reader can find the allegorical. With regard to the Ring, Tolkien tells Unwin:

> You can make the Ring into an allegory of our own time, if you like: an allegory of the inevitable fate that waits for all attempts to defeat evil power by power. But that is only because all power magical or mechanical does always so work. You cannot write a story about an apparently simple magic ring without that bursting in, if you really take the ring seriously, and make things happen as they would happen, if such a thing existed. (Ibid.)

Natural consequences can be understood allegorically, but if that truth is presented without a metaphorical superstructure, it is to Tolkien a narrative moral, an application of the pattern and not The Pattern itself.

In a letter to W.H. Auden on 7 June 1955, Tolkien says of his readers:

> ...what appreciative readers have got out of the work or seen in it has seemed fair enough, even when I do not agree with it. Always excepting, of course, any 'interpretations' in the mode of simple allegory: that is, the particular and topical. In a larger sense, it is I suppose impossible to write any 'story' that is not allegorical in proportion as it 'comes to life'; since each of us is an allegory, embodying in a particular tale and clothed in the garments of time and place, universal truth and everlasting life. (Ibid., 212)

ALLEGORY BY NIGGLE?

At its inception, "Leaf by Niggle" was unique. Responding to Stanley Unwin's suggestion that it be published with his other short works, Tolkien said, "Well! 'Niggle' is so unlike any other short story that I have ever written, or begun, that I wonder if it would consort with them." (Letters, 113). In the same letter he confides:

> ...that story was the only thing I have ever done which cost me absolutely no pains at all. Usually I compose only with great difficulty and endless rewriting. I woke up one morning (more than two years ago [about 1940. See Letters, 320]) with that odd thing virtually complete in my head. It took only a few hours to get down, and then copy out. I am not aware of ever 'thinking' of the story or composing it in the ordinary sense. (Ibid.)

In a letter to his aunt, Jane Neave, in September of 1962, Tolkien gives another facet of the story:

> I am now sending you 'Leaf by Niggle'. I have had a copy made specially to keep if you wish - from the Dublin Review in which it appeared nearly 20 years ago. It was written (I think) just before the War began, though I first read it aloud to my friends early in

> 1940. I recollect nothing about the writing, except that I awoke one morning with it in my head, scribbled it down - and the printed form in the main hardly differs from the first hasty version at all. I find it still quite moving, when I reread it. (Ibid., 320)

Many, like myself, who first came into contact with J.R.R. Tolkien by way of The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings feverishly cast about for more and as a result discovered The Tolkien Reader wherein lay this little gem. I personally have reread 'Niggle' numerous times, quietly and in voz alta, and have been deeply moved by it as well. For years I was not altogether sure what it was that affected me; now I think I know.

There is some evidence to show that 'Leaf by Niggle' is a Christian journey allegory, a passage from life into death into lasting life. I doubt that anyone would gainsay the idea that the unprepared for "long journey" (p. 85) is death and what follows. The Driver (p. 95) is most assuredly the personification of Death or something akin to it. The Workhouse (p. 97) by Tolkien's implication is a purgatory of some kind (see Letters, 195). The Court of Inquiry (p. 99) passes for a Judgement. Hardly anyone would miss the cues given by the First and Second Voices (p. 99) whereby they are understood to be the Father and the Son. Niggle's Parish, while not Heaven, is a Paradise (see Letters, 111). The Mountains are the place of ultimate destination (p. 112) and thus would probably represent the celestial kingdom of God.

Notwithstanding the facility with which we can demonstrate the metaphorical superstructure, Tolkien explicitely declares:

> It is not really or properly an 'allegory' so much as 'mythical'. For Niggle is meant to be a real mixed-quality person and not an 'allegory' of any single vice or virtue. The name Parish proved convenient, for the Porter's joke, but it was not given with any intention of special significance. I once knew of a garderner called Parish. (Letters, 320-21)

The Letters give us a clear understanding as to the life force of the story. In the above mentioned letter to Jane Neave, Tolkien explains:

> Of course some elements are explicable in biographical terms (so obsessively interesting to modern critics that they often value a piece of 'literature' solely insofar as it reveals the author, and especially if that is in a discreditable light). There was a great tree - a hugh poplar with vast limbs - visible through my window even as I lay in bed. I loved it, and was anxious about it. It had been savagely mutilated some years before, but had gallantly grown new limbs - though of course not with the unblemished grace of its former natural self; and now a foolish neighbour was agitating to have it felled. Every tree has its enemy, few have an advocate. (Too often the hate is irrational, a fear of anything large and alive, and not easily tamed or destroyed, though it may clothe itself in pseudo-rational terms.) This fool (Only in this respect - hatred of trees. She was a great and gallant lady.) said that it cut off the sun from her house and garden, and that she feared for her house if it should crash in a high wind. It stood due east from her front door, across a wide road, at a distance nearly thrice its total height. Thus only about the equinox would it even cast a shadow in her direction, and only in the very early morning one that reached across the road to the pavement outside her front gate. And any wind that could have uprooted it and hurled it on her house, would have demolished her and her house without any assistance from the tree... Also, of course, I was anxious about my own internal Tree, The Lord of the Rings. It was growing out of hand, and revealing endless new vistas - and I wanted to finish it, but the world was threatening. And I was dead stuck, somewhere about Ch. 10 (Voice of Saruman) in Book III - with fragments ahead some of which eventualy fitted into Ch. 1 and 3 of Book V, but most of which proved wrong especially about Mordor - and I did not know how to go on... But none of that really illuminates 'Leaf by Niggle' much, does it? (Letters, 321-22)

To Caroline Everett he wrote something quite similar:

> Looking at it myself from a distance I should say that, in addition to my tree-love (it was originally called The Tree) it arose from my own pre-occupation with The Lord of the Rings, the knowledge that it would be finished in great detail or not at all, and the fear (near certainty) that it would be 'not at all'. The war had arisen to darken all horizons. But no such analyses are a complete explanation even of a short story. (Letters, 257)

For Stanley Unwin, J.R.R. Tolkien compares his unfinished short stories as "mere budding leaves like so many of silly Niggle's" (Letters, 113). To his son, Christopher, he writes:

> A story must be told or there'll be no story, yet it is the untold stories that are most moving. I think you are moved by Celebrimbor because it conveys the sudden sense of endless untold stories: mountains seen far away, never to be climbed, distant trees (like Niggle's) never to be approached - or if so only to become 'near trees' (unless in Paradise or N's Parish). (Letters, 110-11)

The over-riding sentiment here is that our author did not sit down to write an allegory per se, but rather an expression of his anguish regarding his creative works. There is structure and direction to the story that is informed by his belief in the theology of Roman Catholicism. But it does not draw attention to itself; it is not central to the moral of the story. It is instead that which holds the tale together, out of sight and out of mind for the most part. Niggle is not an Archetype, he is simply an man who does not have enough time to do the things that he wishes to do, constantly interrupted by the cares of this life. An Everyman? Yes, but more of an everyman; every-case, but lower-case.

I smile at Niggle and his little foibles; his silliness isn't necessarily mine. I suffer with Niggle in the Workhouse; not because I am guilty of the same weaknesses, but because I am weak. I rejoice with

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> will bring love to Fantastica. Then the two worlds will be one." (p. 367.)

Ende's double Fairy Story draws us in with Bastian to the marvellous world of Fantastica. But primarily it draws us in to Bastian's world, so that we feel with him the gamut of emotions that he experiences. We emerge from Bastian's story enriched by the magic of a small boy and his attempts to win the attention and love of his grieving father. As C.S. Lewis observes,

> The Fantastic or Mythical is a Mode available at all ages for some readers; for others, at none. At all ages, if it is well used by the author and meets the right reader, it has the same power: to generalize while remaining concrete, to present in palpable form not concepts or even experiences but whole classes of experience, and to throw off irrelevancies. But at its best it can do more; it can give us experiences we have never had and thus, instead of 'commenting on life,' can add to it. [8]

Ende's work provides evidence for the veracity of Lewis's theory, and supports the necessity of elements "well-used by the author" meeting "the right reader": both are essential to the construction of meaning and to participation in the secondary world. Of course, Ende's book is much more than an allegory, but that demands more space than this paper allows. As allegory, however, it affirms the value of the Fantastic as a means of "adding to life" and entrenches Ende's place as the writer of fantasy among the ranks of the masters, Lewis, Tolkien and MacDonald.

NOTES

[1] Michael Ende, The Neverending Story. Trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Allen Lane, 1983).
[2] Josue V. Harari, "Preface" to Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism (of which he is editor) (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 37.
[3] Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach", in Iser, The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Becket (Baltimore, 1974) quoted by Susan R. Suleiman in her Introduction to The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 44.
[4] J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories", in Tree and Leaf (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1975), pp. 40-42.
[5] C.S. Lewis, "On Stories", in Of This and Other Worlds, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Collins, 1982), p. 35.
[6] M.H. Abrams, "The Deconstructive Angel", in Critical Inquiry 3 (1977), quoted by Suleiman, cit. supra, pp. 42-43.
[7] Christopher Norris, Deconstruction: Theory and Practice (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 108.
[8] C.S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories Say Best What's to be Said", in Of This and Other Worlds. pp. 74-75.

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> 'Take the hilts,' said Gandalf, 'and speak after the Lord, if you are resolved on this.' 'I am,' said Pippin. (RK, p.30-31)

In this scene, Tolkien uses the formula of swearing on the hilts of the sword. He also repeats the tense atmosphere which is evident in the example cited in Finn and Hengest.

Merry's offering service to Theoden has a completely different tone to it.

> 'I have a sword,' said Merry, climbing from his seat, and drawing from its black sheath his small bright blade. Filled suddenly with love for this old man, he knelt on one knee, and took his hand and kissed it. 'May I lay the sword of Meriadoc of the Shire on your lap, Theoden King?' he cried. 'Receive my service if you will!'
>
> 'Gladly will I take it,' said the king: and laying his long old hands upon the brown hair of the hobbit, blessed him. 'Rise now, Meriadoc, esquire of Rohan of the house-hold of Meduseld!' he said. 'Take your sword and bear it unto good fortune!'
>
> 'As a father you shall be to me,' said Merry.
>
> 'For a little while,' said Theoden. (RK, p.59).

This scene follows the second example Tolkien had offered in the Beowulf study. It contains the offer of the sword as part of a gift of vassalship, and the personal relationship between the lord and warrior wherein the lord stands as father to his follower.

By placing the two scenes from The Lord of the Rings beside the examples of sword-oaths from the far older literature Tolkien knew in his role as scholar, one can see an example of specific derivation. Tolkien took something he knew well and absorbed it into his Sub-creation. The incidents in his fiction are not copies of events he knew as a scholar, rather they are the imagined children of those events. They exist not to display customs about sword-oaths, but rather to display character traits of the two hobbits. Pippin is moved by stung pride, the same pride that had been caught in the palantir's spell. Merry, however, responds to Theoden the man with love, responds with willing service to Theoden King.

The fact that Tolkien's fictive incidents are evidently derived from his scholarly examples does not imply that it was a conscious connection in his mind at the time he was writing The Lord of the Rings. In the introduction to Finn and Hengest. Alan Bliss makes clear that Tolkien gave his Beowulf lectures many times over the course of his whole career. The examples of sword-oaths were likely, then, to be part of the background fabric of Tolkien's imagination. It is the background fabric of any Sub-creator's imagination which shapes the details of the Secondary world. Anything that one has studied and absorbed with interest may provide the sort of enriching detail, as these two types of oath-taking provide in The Lord of the Rings.

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Niggle before his Tree because of the many seedlings within my own soul that I would have come to maturity someday. I laugh in the Mountains, knowing that if I do not paint them high and beautiful and far away, there are many who have and maybe it will not be a bad thing to be a Parish. Allegory does not reach that deeply.

A little story, this "Leaf by Niggle"; but like Atkins, I can't get it out of my mind.